

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BUENOS AIRES 002912

SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA AND INL
NSC FOR TOM SHANNON AND MIKE DEMPSEY
SOUTHCOM FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/12/2014

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AR](#) [PROTESTS](#)

SUBJECT: ARGENTINA CRACKS DOWN ON PIQUETEROS IN SANTA CRUZ

REF: A. BUENOS AIRES 1104

[B](#). BUENOS AIRES 1029

Classified By: Ambassador Lino Gutierrez for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Early in the morning of Saturday October 2, 85 members of an elite Gendarmeria riot control unit, assisted by provincial police, broke up a roadblock and forcibly ended the piquetero occupation of an oil depot in the town of Caleta Olivia in President Nestor Kirchner's home province of Santa Cruz. Thirty-six piqueteros were arrested and three remain in detention at present. A reliable source indicates that those close to the President, and possibly the President himself, ordered the Gendarmeria operation. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) In a decisive operation, an elite Gendarmeria riot control unit broke up a roadblock and ended the piquetero occupation of an oil depot in the Santa Cruz town of Caleta Olivia on October 2 (see reftels). While press reports indicate that the swift GOA response was a local action undertaken by the Gendarmeria and Provincial Police, POLOFF has been informed that it was the work of an elite Gendarmeria unit ordered into action by the Casa Rosada. During an October 3 meeting with POLOFF, General Roberto Nieva Malaver, Chief of Operations for the Gendarmeria (number four in the organization), outlined the details of the operation.

[1](#)3. (C) Malaver stated that at approximately 1000 hours on October 1 his office received instructions "from the Casa Rosada" to immediately take action to end the oil depot takeover. He stated that the original instructions demanded action by 1700 hours that day, but that he informed his Interior Ministry contact that normal deployment procedures would necessitate a few days to transport the nearest riot control unit to Santa Cruz. He reported that the Interior Ministry then contacted the Argentine Air Force to provide needed airlift capability. Malaver ordered the riot control unit stationed in La Pampa to immediately mobilize for deployment, and the 85-man unit was airborne with all equipment, including attack dogs, by 1600 hours. While the unit was airborne, a federal prosecutor issued a warrant authorizing them to disband the protesters. He reported that by 2200 hours the unit had established a command base in Caleta Olivia and after coordination with local police and medical units, moved on the Piqueteros at or around 0200 hours. Malaver relayed that the action "took less than 15 minutes" once it started. According to Malaver, the riot control unit was supported by a large contingent of provincial police, and three ambulances, in case of injury. He stressed that the unit went into action fully armored but without the use of billy-clubs, water hoses or teargas. He stated the decision not to use billy-clubs was made to limit possible injury to the Piqueteros; weather conditions prevented the use of teargas. He reported that the Gendarmeria suffered two minor casualties. A Molotov cocktail burned one soldier and another was stabbed by the sharpened point of a piquetero's stick. Malaver also reported that the protesters suffered no serious injuries. (NOTE: A Vintage Oil executive confirmed to ECONCOUNS that the Gendarmeria had cleared the piquetero roadblock on the highway in Caleta Olivia, but asserted that the provincial police removed the 35 piqueteros that were occupying the top of one of the oil tanks in the depot, thereby suggesting two separate actions carried out by two distinct groups).

[1](#)4. (C) Thirty-six piqueteros were detained and three remain in custody at present. There have been press reports and subsequent protests claiming human rights abuses occurred to detained piqueteros, but Malaver was quick to point out that the alleged abuse reportedly took place after the Gendarmeria had handed the detainees over to the Provincial Police. Santa Cruz Governor Sergio Acevedo told DCM that he supported the law enforcement action, which he claimed was conducted at his request. He also said that he had agreed to look into the allegations of police abuse.

[1](#)5. (C) Malaver was clearly proud of his unit's success, and talked at great length about the difference between the five Gendarmeria riot control units and those available to other forces. He stated that, as opposed to federal and provincial

police forces consisting of regular duty officers that engage protesters individually, often resulting in a general melee, his forces "move in like the Roman Legion; they don't fight as individuals they are trained to stay together and move as one unit." He also pointed out that these five units, located in strategic areas including Buenos Aires Province and La Pampa, train year round solely for this sort of mission. He opined that the Gendarmeria was the only force that had units trained and equipped to break up protesters with a minimum risk of injury posed to either the soldiers or the protesters. The meeting with POLOFF ended abruptly when an aide to Malaver entered the room to remind him he had to leave for the airport. Malaver confided in POLOFF that he had been ordered to travel to Santa Cruz to start the process of establishing a sixth elite riot control unit to be permanently based in the President's home province "as soon as possible."

16. (C) After Malaver's departure, POLOFF continued the meeting with Hector Schenone, the Gendarmeria General in charge of narcotics control, who explained that the Interior Ministry had recently approved the recruitment of 8,000 more Gendarmeria over the next four years. He stated this was at least partially in recognition of the increased public security role that the force was playing, especially in the Province of Buenos Aires. He intimated that a major obstacle facing the force was that its training facility was overtaxed with both Gendarmeria recruits and almost 400 recruits for the new Buenos Aires Police Force. He stated that at the present time only 1,000 of the 2,000 recruits authorized for this year were in training, and it was clear he did not like the idea of provincial police recruits taking training slots from his force.

17. (C) COMMENT: Although reaction to piquetero activities are historically much harsher in the provinces than the potentially-explosive Buenos Aires, this had not been the case in Caleta Olivia, the site of repeated labor strife. It is clear that this rapid deployment ordered from the President's office marks a much more proactive approach by Kirchner to protests that affect his traditional center of power. It is of course possible that Kirchner authorized the use of force because he has a higher degree of trust in the Gendarmeria to intervene without bloodshed than the Federal and Provincial Police in the Buenos Aires area. His order to establish a Gendarmeria riot control unit in Santa Cruz seems to indicate that he will not brook future piquetero protest in the province. END COMMENT.

GUTIERREZ